



BRYAN MEADE

Ray of hope in horror of Aleppo

Shining a light on the darkness and devastation in Syria's largest city has helped the Irish artist Brian Maguire produce some of his most haunting and powerful work yet, writes *Cristin Leach*

Last March, the Irish artist Brian Maguire went to Aleppo, Syria's largest city and once home to 4m people. He went to examine the immediate aftermath of five years of civil war and siege on one of the world's oldest metropolises, in a country still at war, driven by a suspicion that what the media had to offer in terms of reportage was not the full story.

Maguire took photographs and did workshops with children. He talked to those still living in a city extensively reduced to rubble, a place where doctors in 2016 had coined a new term to describe the psychological trauma of the children: human devastation syndrome. Then he returned to his studio

to make a series of paintings, now on show at the Irish Museum of Modern Art.

Maguire is an artist whose work doesn't apologise for itself. He doesn't care if his paintings make you feel uncomfortable, anxious, afraid, unexpectedly complicit; in fact, they are intended to. They are an outraged statement, a shout for attention, but not for the art itself. Rather, they serve to cast a spotlight on places and people that Maguire thinks we should be looking at more closely. His work is a record of where he himself has been

looking, an act of directing your attention there.

War Changes Its Address: The Aleppo Paintings follows on from *Over Our Heads the Hollow*

Seas Closed Up, an exhibition in the Kerlin gallery in 2016 which featured paintings about the European refugee crisis, based on internet images. The two are linked, not just in terms of the relationship between the war in Syria, human displacement and refugees entering Europe, but in relation to Maguire's entire oeuvre.

His focus on Syria is connected to his own wider feelings about the international arms trade and its devastating effect on the lives of, mostly, the world's poorest people. It is also about place: Aleppo was one of the world's most beautiful cities. By the time the rebels surrendered to Bashar al-Assad's regime in December 2016, it was a physical shell of its former self, its buildings an apt symbol for Maguire's

stated belief: "War is the only constant in the world. It just moves around."

Now in his late sixties, the Wicklow-born Maguire has made his career painting, and painting with, the disenfranchised and the dispossessed. From his early involvement in the Northern Ireland civil rights movement in the 1970s to his work in prisons and psychiatric institutions, Sao Paulo's favelas, Nairobi's slums and Mexico's Ciudad Juarez, he is a sociopolitical artist, an artist-activist, a history painter with an overt agenda.

In Aleppo, he found a more liberal society and a more complicated political situation than reports had led him to expect. He came back and made monumental paintings, with monumental intent. Two of the five in this show fill the first and final walls that book-end the exhibition. Aleppo 5 is his masterpiece, a jagged, broken shout that says: "Look, look at this." Not, look at this painting, but look at this place.

If Maguire is a messenger, this work is a report back. He shows us buildings reduced to component parts of concrete pillars and breeze blocks; windows blasted, blue sky in the space where rooms once held people and their lives, framed by what remains of the structures within which they once lived and worked.

These are rubble paintings, of plaster and dust. No people appear until the show's final image, in which a single blurred figure dressed in black traipses by almost like an afterthought, his body cut off at the knee by the edge of the canvas. He passes on foot as if only to give scale to the enormous, collapsing structure behind him. The dead building dominates our view as he ignores it, walking by, busy on his phone or choosing not to look.

The rest of the show feels like a record of a ghost town. Aleppo 2 and 3 share a room, depicting stark outcrops of crumbling structures, precarious crags of loosened walls, unstable basements and balconies onto nowhere. This is a portrait of a broken place.

There is no rallying cry here about rising from the ashes. Maguire isn't trying to jolly anyone along. He's there

to show us how it is. Still, some sense of promise comes from the clearness of the pale blue sky and the consistently yellow light. This is despite our knowledge of Maguire's past output, that he is not interested in giving us an aesthetic escape, a beautiful balm from our feelings of discomfort or shared collective guilt. It is not like him to reduce his subject to disaster beauty, rubble porn. And yet, this exhibition seems to skirt on the verges of that, a dangerous edge to walk. His paintings are remarkable, which also makes them beautiful to behold. Dripping with thinner, heaving with the pure black shadows of empty windows and the dark undersides of balconies, the quiet dignity of crumbling facades still standing.

Maguire knows he cannot control our reaction, all he can do is tell us where to look. If the show is a call to action, is it an effective one? He leaves that up to us too. The buildings he has painted are isolated symbols of the destruction war brings, as much as they are a depiction of the thing itself. They are not a proxy for feeling or connection, they are a conduit to it. Although the paintings document outrageous circumstances, they don't feel overthrown by outrage. Instead, they bear witness.

Aleppo 4, the opening painting, shows a grand boulevard with patches of green and brown, an implication that nature might return to take over what humans have left destroyed. There are telegraph poles without wires, windows without panes, frames without doors. The perspective in this painting is arresting. Maguire catches your eye and pulls your attention along a path of clear blue sky.

Aleppo is a place blasted open. He shows what happened and what remains, not what will come next. And it's likely when it comes that he won't be as interested, from an artistic point of view.

These paintings are meant to make you feel humble, and they do. Are they meant to make you feel angry? They don't muster that. They are sad, lonely and quietly shocking, but they are

aftermath images that perhaps remain at a certain remove precisely because they do not contain images of people, suffering or otherwise.

That is why the final painting is so important. A masterpiece of ambition in terms of this body of work, it offers a widescreen, kerbside view of what war leaves behind, what is left after fighting became more important than living. There

are still hundreds of thousands of displaced children in Syria, and more still trapped in besieged areas of the country. This artist has drawn your attention to this place, and has made a record of what he has seen. What you do after that is up to you. As he is keen to point out, war goes on. **E**

War Changes Its Address: The Aleppo Paintings, Imma, Dublin, until May 6

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Facing up to our painful past

Amanda Dunsmore uses video and framed portraits to document the peace process poignantly, writes *Cristin Leach*

How difficult it is to sit still and do nothing, to pause, breathe and allow your thoughts to settle. Who might a person be when they are not doing, just being? Especially a person with a public profile, whose identity is tied up with action, with what they do and have done. Who are any of us when we are being silent, just ourselves, sitting still?

It's a question at the heart of portrait-making and one reason why the portrait genre traditionally includes clues to the subject's origins, interests or achievements, offering

THE CRITICS

paraphernalia in the form of background objects, clothes, colours, symbols, insignia. Portrait-makers ask themselves not just who the person is, but how best to capture them for all time.

The artist Amanda Dunsmore started making video portraits of key figures in the Northern Ireland peace process in 2004. She has filmed David Irvine, Monica McWilliams, Martin McGuinness, John Hume and David Trimble. The latter two provide the hefty anchor images in her excellent

Keeper exhibition now at the Hugh Lane gallery in Dublin. The show coincides with the 20th anniversary of the Good Friday agreement. It also includes a video portrait of a less public figure: Mairead Corrigan Maguire, one of the three people who, in August 1976, established the Community of Peace People, a group Dunsmore describes as "a cross-community citizens' movement".

Part of Dunsmore's aim is to return the names Mairead Corrigan Maguire, Betty Williams and Ciarán McKeown to public discourse. "This grassroots movement brought the killing rate down 70% in a short period of active protest by citizens against the killing, the war – and that 70% never rose again," says Dunsmore. "They were integral in the peace process, they facilitated

many discussions, they continue to facilitate discussions." Corrigan and Williams won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1976, but their names and faces have since slipped from public view.

Keeper also includes an audio portrait of McKeown and a framed black-and-white poster-photograph of Corrigan, McKeown and Williams with the singer Joan Baez, marching in Drogheda in December 1977. The Peace People were founded after the trio met at the funeral of Mairead's sister's three children, who were hit by an IRA getaway car when the driver was shot by British soldiers. The poster sits behind Corrigan Maguire in her video portrait.

Dunsmore offers a portrait as a durational take, a temporal likeness consisting



“Trimble’s and Hume’s faces loom large, almost floor to ceiling

of a 20-minute filmed loop, that requires its audience to be still and watch, much as she required her subjects to do the same. Trimble's and Hume's faces loom large, almost floor to ceiling, blinking, twitching, breathing, adjusting. Endlessly it seems, on repeat. Dunsmore presents a classical bust form, the male body (clad in shirt, tie and suit jacket), cut and squared off. In this format a person is reduced – or elevated – to head and shoulders; intellect and implied strength; nobility of face. They become a symbol, a figurehead, literally.

Hume sighs a little and shifts, twitches his mouth, grimaces almost, before returning to neutral. He looks thoughtful, remorseful at times. It's not a particularly flattering format. Wrinkles

and pores are blown large. The rise and fall of his shoulders and chest provide a rhythm, a human pulse. You might find yourself breathing in sync, and this is part of Dunsmore's skill – incontrovertibly humanising her subjects.

Trimble seems more anxious, more alert. He blinks too, and swallows, but is a little on edge. Hume appears occasionally impatient at having to sit and be still. Except neither subject is just sitting, they are watching something. Trimble and Hume are watching her 20-minute film Billy's Museum, which also forms part of the show.

Dunsmore recently filmed the senator George Mitchell, who contributes a heartfelt personal essay to the show's catalogue. Same backdrop,

Eye contact the 100 portraits, left; Dunsmore's video of Maguire, below left

same format. He's also watching Billy's Museum, which documents an archive kept by Northern Ireland prison officer Billy Hull, described by Dunsmore as "a radical amateur historian". She claims: "At the height of the conflict, he repeatedly disobeyed an order to destroy materials. Instead he saved them."

Dunsmore met Hull while working as an artist in residence at Long Kesh. "It was subversive... He hid them for 15 years. He knew he was living history, so he wanted to keep them for future generations."

Dunsmore's film reveals Billy's evidence: of Mars bars with drill bits hidden inside; weapons; escape attempts; and amateur alcohol-making equipment. The artist walks a brilliant line between comfort and discomfort in all these works, for her subjects and her viewers. Corrigan Maguire was filmed last summer in the Peace House on Lisburn Road. She is watching a different video, also made by Dunsmore, based on the People's Portraits, on show in the next room.

This installation brings the exhibition full circle, with 100 framed portraits extracted from an archive of glass-plate negatives of people arrested between 1899 and 1918. Of the thousands, Dunsmore selected 100, for their humanity, their direct stares into the camera. Fashions aside, they look oddly modern, contemporary, as if you could meet them on the street even now. People are people is the message. Our humanity is what connects us.

Keeper also features John Lavery's 1916 paintings of the unionist politician Edward Carson and the Irish nationalist John Redmond. Stiff and formal, they offer a remarkable contrast to Dunsmore's work, but she feels a connection with Lavery as a social documenter. "I look at the legacy, the importance of a portrait, the future of it. Because I will no longer be here, but the works are," she says.

Dunsmore held on to Hume's portrait for 14 years

before showing it, "because I felt I didn't have the right context to show it, and I knew it needed the right timing, socially, historically. The importance of himself and David Trimble [is] to show them together."

"I am very interested in how society views these portraits, just as society views Redmond and Carson's portraits, how over 100 years that changes." She will not be showing her Mitchell portrait

"until the appropriate time and context comes".

Meanwhile, it is dark in the video-screening rooms, peaceful and contemplative, heavy with memory and the weight of the past. Yet we feel the invisible presence of Dunsmore's own hand in all of this: the artist as record keeper, record taker, record maker. ■

Keeper is at the Hugh Lane, Dublin, until July 22

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GATE THEATRE



Putting pain in perspective

Artists, writers and film-makers have come together in Galway to look for answers to medical mysteries, writes *Cristin Leach*

In 2013, Harper's Magazine published an essay by Leslie Jamison, an American writer, entitled *The Devil's Bait: Symptoms, Signs and the Riddle of Morgellons*. If you haven't heard of the illness, you're likely to have the same reaction Jamison did. "For me," she wrote, "Morgellons disease started as a novelty." Symptoms include a feeling that something is crawling just under the skin, but the defining feature is strange fibres coming up through the skin's surface. Crystalline substances too. Fluff, fuzz, threads; foreign bodies emerging from the human body.

Sufferers encounter widespread disbelief among friends, family and medical practitioners, who are suspicious of delusion or psychosomatic disorder. And yet the patients keep coming. *Pharmakon*, a 22-minute film by the artist Lucy Beech showing at the Galway Arts Centre, follows a newly

THE CRITICS

trained security guard who discovers a maverick commercial operation offering alternative therapies to sufferers of a disease with all the appearance of Morgellons. A "frequency cleanse" promises to release bacteria "by the power of vibrations", delivered via bottles of water to be ingested while watching a video. "Keep your eyes on the screen as you drink," patients are told.

Beech's short film weaves an intelligent narrative around her topic, digging into the concept of groupthink, psychological control, the nature of truth, and the endless search for answers that accompanies medical mysteries. *Pharmakon* also questions the notion of what it means to be healthy. The operation looks like a con, but does it matter if the patients feel better?

Much of the art in the small but well-conceived group show *Ex Voto: The Body + The Institution* grapples with that

connection between mental and physical wellness, and the relationship between the medical industry, the patient, and an "it's all in your head" diagnosis. Beech's film takes a turn when the security guard becomes a cautious convert to the Healing Grapevine method, and we are left wondering whether what she really needs is a place to belong.

Beech's imaginary business leverages clients' emotions around the disbelief and disrespect they encounter. "We know what's happening in our bodies is real," says its spokesman, "you have a right to have your suffering acknowledged." The work in *Ex Voto* is all about acknowledging suffering and pain. In Latin, an *ex voto* is an offering made in exchange for a miracle granted, such as recovery from illness.

At the back of the gallery, a short film by Jenna Bliss starts with a subtitled setting (New York, 1879) and voiced words: "My dear friends and I console one another on what has been called our mental

derangement." *Poison the Cure* weaves a set of interconnected thoughts from 1800s New York to 1956 Puerto Rico, where a young factory worker is taking part in a birth control medical trial. The 30-minute film is intercut with logos of real pharmaceutical companies such as Pfizer, and uses multiple narratives. It's about money and health, ethics and competition, colonisation, class, gender, and the promise of medicine, which can be equated to the promise of health, and perhaps most significantly and enticingly the promise of no pain. Upper-class women at a New York tea party are

self-administering daytime shots of morphine as a "cure". Bliss's slow-building film is convoluted, but it does ultimately pack a punch with a message about power, control and oblivion.

The 19th century-rooted tradition of connecting women's pain or illness to a gendered diagnosis of "hysteria" has a long reach here. Miracles, Cecilia Bullo's neon sign, is one of the show's more instantly enticing and accessible offerings, flashing the words "(don't) believe in miracles". Bullo also shows For Grace Deceived, a large heart on a purple velvet cushion. The list of materials

from which it's made have clear psychological implications: bones, dental plaster, antidepressant tablets, anti-anxiety tablets, lead.

Even the titles of some of the works sound painful. After *Transcatheter Aortic Valve*, Judy Foley's installation, features tiny hand-sewn structures in wax paper. They resemble little festive pavilions, but are in fact scaled re-creations of the biological component of a prosthetic heart valve.

Rajinder Singh, the only male artist in the group, shows black-and-white photographs in which the



Healthy interest *Pharmakon* 2016 by Beech, far left, and *Panopticon* by Gleeson

female body is entrapped, beleaguered, compromised by compresses, props and splints; and *Tumours*, a crowd of hand-formed clay figurines, one of which is a rendition of the 25,000-year-old *Venus of Willendorf*, an archaeological art find and one of the world's oldest images of a woman.

Bliss is from New York, Beech is British, Bullo is Irish-Italian based in Dublin, and Malaysian-born Singh is London-based. They offer varied perspectives on pain, a universal human theme. But the piece that ties the show together is a text by an Irish writer based in Dublin. *Panopticon* by Sinéad Gleeson is displayed on 10 sheets of paper, pinned to the wall. Subtitled "hospital visions, or encounters with medical spaces as an individual", we can read the text snippets in any order. Together they form a staccato whole, part stream of consciousness, part research and observation, including gathered or overheard hospital phrases. "A clot sounds like a creaky door," says the haematologist to the students.

"I left because I do not think money and medicine mix," says an Uzbek anaesthetist. "Do you have health insurance?" is a repeated question.

Gleeson's text grounds this show in direct, lived experience. It's a report from the front that is clearly personal. In the face of it, Singh's imagery feels almost second-hand. His photographs owe a visual and conceptual debt to the work of Alice Maher and Cecily Brennan, and an aesthetic one to the late American photographer Francesca Woodman.

Gleeson's words tie with themes and concepts in the work of Singh, Bliss and the others, but her text makes the conceptual personal. For Gleeson, hospital is a "place of excavation, of digging into the body to find its history". She describes stark visual imagery: lines drawn on the body to guide the surgeon, "the colour chart of urinalysis".

There are references to overcrowding, and the hospital death during

pregnancy of Savita Halappanavar.


All the artists here investigate the power play – social, political, financial, personal, historical – that is at stake in wellness and illness. That battle takes conscious form in Gleeson's recorded assimilation of medical language as an assertion of autonomy, with words as a weapon, a shield or a salve. She takes ownership of her experience – and suffering – through her ownership of words. "Pain forks in flesh", "A man drills into my chest", "Tell me when you're going to do it"; in the end, it comes down to the vulnerability of it all.

A last-minute epilogue nails down the impression that *Panopticon* is a piece Gleeson might never finish writing. Because if the body survives,


it goes on, and with bodies come pain.

The artists emphasize how illness leaves us alone with ourselves, how pain is an isolating factor. No one else can bear it for us. Gleeson quotes Susan Sontag: "My cancer is not your cancer, my fractures are not yours." It's a sentiment at odds with the unifying factor behind the success of this show. In the end, our bodies, their vulnerability, and our encounters with illness and medical treatment offer a realm of experience that unites us all. At the Healing Grapevine, clients are reassured: "I want you to know that we can be alone together." ■

Ex-Voto: The Body + The Institution is at Galway Arts Centre until March 10




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